Showing Our Deeds:

Activism and Exhibition Space

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Are We There Yet? 150 Years of Progress Towards Equality was an exhibition curated by a group of staff at Manchester Metropolitan University, which was open to the public in the *Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections* gallery between August and November 2015.[1] It explored advances in British equalities law over a 150-year period, and had a strong grounding in local history. Both the subject matter and scope of the exhibition were wide-ranging, and the project team, although helped greatly by the expertise of staff at *MMU Special Collections*, had little curatorial experience. This chapter examines how a team of feminist non-specialists negotiated some of the challenges this raised, and how the differing academic interests and lived experiences of the project team were incorporated into the exhibition. It explores the processes involved in putting together the exhibition and looks at visitors' responses to the activist space this created. It also reflects on the contents of the exhibition and the ways in which it helped to inspire further activism.

Manchester Metropolitan University has a strong history of supporting diversity and inclusion, and this exhibition stemmed from (and was influenced by) the respective and collaborative works of the university's four equality and diversity forums: Gender, Disability, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT), and Race. Although the exhibition had a firm legal grounding, the aim was not to give a potted history of the legal reform. Instead, the exhibition sought to explore some of the personal stories, social issues, and works of literature that propagated, and later reflected, these legal advances. *MMU Special Collections* housed the exhibition in their space but also provided a number of items to exhibit, including books, posters and Victorian greetings cards. The university has a strong

[1] The exhibition was curated by a core team of four staff members: Catharine Tucker, Kate Cook, Margaret Kendall and Sarah May. This chapter is written by the two who are still at the University, the others having moved on to fresh challenges in the interim. The exhibition would not have happened without considerable help from staff at *MMU Special Collections*, most of all Stephanie Boydell, who was with us from the beginning.

and varied collection of children's literature, which formed part of the exhibition, to aid with the exploration of the changing equalities landscape. While initially conservative and lagging behind social and legal changes, children's books have increasingly paved the way for social reform (see Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 1998; Henry, 1988).

The exhibition focused on four specific areas: Gender, Disability, Race and LGBT lives, and was organised using a chronological approach divided into eight sections, representative of the periods 1865-99, 1900-49, 1950-59, 1960-69, 1970-79, 1980-89, 1990-99, and 2000-15. The decision to display items chronologically was taken relatively late, as a solution to the inextricably linked nature of the various strands of the exhibition. This structure was far from ideal and sometimes proved restrictive, particularly when social and legal changes spanned more than one decade. However, by organising the exhibition in this way, the team was able to adopt an intersectional approach, which clearly demonstrated the overlapping issues facing activists. Brenner defines intersectionality as 'an analytic strategy to address the interrelation of multiple, cross-cutting institutionalized power relations' (2014, p. 33). *Are We There Yet?* was not an exhibition which aimed to show resolved issues around (in)equality. Rather, it prompted visitors to reflect upon the complex links between various forms of oppression, particularly: sexism; ableism; racism; and homophobia. It demonstrated the obvious yet often overlooked fact that humans are multi-dimensional and fight for more than one type of emancipation, and posed questions regarding the actual extent of the perceived social and legal advances.

This chapter examines the process of putting the exhibition together and looks at responses to the space this created. It focuses on the aspects of the exhibition that engaged with questions around women's role(s) in the world. We begin by outlining the inception of the exhibition, before moving on to discuss and analyse the decision-making processes and the public reception of the exhibition.

The Curatorial Team

The original idea for *Are We There Yet?* came from a curator within *MMU Special Collections* (Stephanie Boydell), and a discussion of the idea took place during a Gender Staff Forum

meeting in October 2013. It took little under two years from this initial discussion until the exhibition opened in August 2015, the project having been driven forward by a large, all-female group of staff (with a core project team of four women), supported by both male and female colleagues. This section of the chapter considers the make-up of the curatorial team and reflects on the ways in which this impacted on the exhibition itself.

Since most members of the project group were working on a voluntary basis in addition to their main roles (the exception being Catharine Tucker, an intern hired in April 2015 to work on the final stages of the exhibition), group membership was transitory and some members attended far fewer meetings than others. The relative chaos of a fluctuating team had an interesting effect on the final outcome: every woman brought with them their own stories and lived experiences – of sexism, racism, homophobia, ableism, sexual assault and activism – which all influenced curatorial decisions. The project team was comprised of a group of women, with ages ranging from early 60s to early 20s, and each woman came to curation from different academic fields. The two authors of this chapter, for example, readily admit that their own disciplines had an impact on their curatorial decisions. Kate Cook is a Senior Lecturer within Manchester Law School, and so her focus on the legal aspects of the exhibition is hardly surprising. Sarah May's academic interests lie in using literature as a lens through which to view history, and so she felt passionately that children's literature should form an important part of the discussion. The team were also keen to use the exhibition as a way to share the experiences of lesser-known activists and were able to interweave these histories throughout the exhibition. A large project team inevitably created complexity, since members brought biases with them. However, had the exhibition belonged firmly to one or two people from the outset, it might have been that favourite pieces or personal agendas would have displaced the desire to create something truly inclusive of multiple experiences.

Since the project team was all-female, and every team member had extensive experience of feminist activism, the parts of the exhibition relating to women's rights were relatively easy to curate. An abundance of materials was provided by various contributors, which covered a wide cross-section of intersectional feminist activism. However, the political views and feminist approaches of the team were never discussed in any detail: the exhibition did not

adopt any singular political viewpoint, and both second- and third-wave feminists took leadership roles within the decision-making processes. (For a concise summary on the waves of feminism, see Purvis, 2004). This method had the effect of creating a broad appeal for visitors. However, given that the content of the exhibition was always dependent on what curators were willing and able to produce within busy schedules, objections to contributions, and biases in terms of personal interests, often went unspoken.

Despite the broad remit of the exhibition, there were also some obvious omissions when considering the changes in equalities laws over a 150-year period. The team felt that any exhibition on equalities should tie in with the institution's approach to diversity and inclusion. Manchester Metropolitan University does not currently have staff forums working on religion or age-equality, and this undoubtedly influenced the scope of the exhibition, since neither age nor religion were expressly included within the scope of the exhibition.

Artefacts and Decisions

Are We There Yet? was made up of over 200 individual artefacts, sourced from Manchester Metropolitan University's collections, the archives of local organisations, and the personal collections of staff involved with the exhibition.[2] The artefacts used were collected gradually and the decisions about what should be included evolved as the team settled on the time-line format and on the legal advances as a structural framework. The exhibition was firmly rooted in Manchester, and many of the items displayed allowed us to explore the role the city and its residents played in bringing about social and political change.

During the months before its opening, the team worked to refine the scope and message of the exhibition. The remit evolved to include a more intertwined approach to legal changes and children's literature, a defined time period of 150 years, and the team also made the

[2] The exhibition itself included a note of thanks to: The Ahmed Ullah Iqbal Race Relations Resource Centre; Manchester Central Library; Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People; North West Film Archive and The People's History Museum.

decision to arrange the exhibition chronologically, according to the eight eras. However, the modest physical space available for the exhibition remained fixed at around 150 m^2 and restricted choice regarding items to display. In order to maximise the space available, the decision was taken to utilise wall space by displaying posters, creating a graffiti wall, and showing videos on screens mounted to the walls. One of the videos shown was a short film from the 1970s, from the BBC Race Relations Archive (Dalgleish, 1972). Here, a group of Black children discussed the representation of children in literature, and how they did not see themselves reflected in the books they read. This video was particularly effective, exhibited alongside examples of children's books from the same era. The majority of children's books available in Britain during the 1960s and 70s featured white characters, despite the increase in immigration to the UK from African and Caribbean countries. The common exception to this was in representations such as the mischievous 'Golliwogs' in Enid Blyton's *Noddy* series, where the non-white characters were portrayed as mischievous or troublesome (1949-63; in modern versions of the *Noddy* books, the Golliwogs have been replaced with less racially-sensitive goblins). Multiculturalism had only just begun to appear in American children's books a few years earlier, thanks to works such as Ezra Jack Keats's *Whistle for Willie* (1964) and *Goggles!* (1969) and, while these books were beginning to permeate UK households, progress was slow. (For an excellent discussion on ethnic diversity in children's literature, see Chetty, 2016).

The curatorial team was particularly interested in showing the role of activism in creating change. This was doubtless because everyone within the team had been involved in some form of feminist activism at some point. The eventual exhibition brought together feminist zines, badges, leaflets, banners and newspaper cuttings to present some of the issues faced by activist groups over the decades.

Indeed, the exhibition began with a reminder of the 1819 peaceful suffrage protest in Manchester, which resulted in the deaths of 15 people and was dubbed the 'Peterloo Massacre' in ironic comparison with the British victory at Waterloo, just 5 years earlier (Read, 1973). The resulting Representation of the People's Act 1867 gave over a million working-class men the right to vote and prompted protests for female emancipation.

Opening *Are We There Yet?* with an image of the Peterloo Massacre had the effect of firmly grounding the exhibition in Manchester. The use of local history to highlight major legal advances was a deliberate move and influenced many of the team's curatorial decisions, since one of the aims of the exhibition was to raise awareness of the University's role in the bringing about of change, and to increase the profile of the collections held within *MMU Special Collections*. The connections with the University and the city were emphasised when considering the fight for Votes for Women. A 1910 photograph of Manchester School of Art students wearing 'Votes for Women' placards was used to illustrate the fight for female suffrage. Using stories of local people to illustrate how legal changes came about, allowed the team to create a real sense of shared heritage and empowerment; it allowed the team to clearly set out the position that individual activism has the power to change lives.

Drawing upon the theme of individual activism, the exhibition also invited visitors to become protestors by adding their views onto a wall, in the form of graffiti. This was a particularly useful tool for gauging the effects of the exhibition in creating a safe space for activism. Indeed, many visitors felt able to share their own experiences, to comment on current global equality issues, and to reflect upon some of the extant latent inequalities in British society.

Manchester's Role in the Struggle for Equality

The exhibition began with an exploration of the history surrounding the fight for universal suffrage and went on to examine the struggle for votes for women. The Representation of the People Act 1867 allowed a million more people the right to vote but importantly failed to make it clear that the 'people' to which it referred were men. As a result, some women felt that they were entitled to vote if they had the property qualifications required by the Act (Marlow, 2001, p. 11). Owing to a legal loophole, Manchester shopkeeper Lily Maxwell was included in a register of electors and, in 1867, is recorded as being the first woman to vote in an election (*Ibid*., pp. 12-14). It is apparent from contemporaneous reports that there were already active suffragists in Manchester, long before Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters began their militant campaigning. Indeed, Lydia Becker, an amateur scientist

and founder of the Women's Suffrage Journal, escorted Maxwell to the polling station to cast her vote (Liddington and Norris, 1978). Becker was the leader of the Women's Suffrage Society in Manchester during the 1870s and 80s and her campaigning resulted in a court case known as *Chorlton* v *Lings* where 5,346 women householders of Manchester tried to register as voters. In court, on 7th November 1868, a barrister appearing for the women was Dr Richard Pankhurst (Mrs Pankhurst's husband). The law found the women to be 'personally incapable' and so they lost their case. The decision to include a photograph and brief biography of Lydia Becker in the exhibition was deliberate. While her influence on Emmeline Pankhurst and the struggle for women's suffrage is documented in literature (see especially Bartley, 2002, p. 22), Becker's name is not well-known, even in the area in which she lived and campaigned.

Four decades later, on 13th October 1905 Christabel Pankhurst and her friend, Annie Kenney, famously attended a Liberal meeting at the Free Trade Hall, in Manchester, addressed by Sir Edward Grey (Pugh, 2002, pp. 127-129). Both women shouted out 'Will the Liberal government give women the vote?' which was ignored, leading to further shouting and the unfurling of a banner. The women were eventually removed from the hall by police. Fearing that they were simply going to be told to leave, Christabel repeatedly spat at and slapped a policeman, until they were both arrested. They were given a fine or a short prison term (seven days for Christabel) and chose to go to prison. This attracted the attention they wanted and the militant campaign for Votes for Women had begun.

These arrests – illustrated in the exhibition using photographs of the Free Trade Hall – kept the local element of the exhibition clear. Indeed, the struggle for Votes for Women had close ties with Manchester and the University. The Pankhurst family lived on Nelson Street, Chorlton-on-Medlock (within walking distance of the University's All Saint's campus), in a building now called The Pankhurst Centre, which houses several women's charities and a small museum (Pankhurst Centre, accessed 02.02.2017). Emmeline Pankhurst, Christabel's mother, worked as the registrar for Rusholme for some years (until 1907), registering births and deaths (Pugh, 2002, p. 82) and Christabel studied law at the University of Manchester. Sylvia Pankhurst was a student at Manchester School of Art, now a part of Manchester Metropolitan University, where, in 2016, a centre for the study of gender and gender equality was formed and named for her (Sylvia Pankhurst Gender Research Centre, accessed

02.02.2017). *MMU Special Collections* houses an excellent collection of editions of the Women's Social and Political Union newspaper, *The Suffragette*, edited by Christabel Pankhurst. These formed part of the exhibition, as they were able to demonstrate the vigour, reach and momentum of the campaign.

The interest in suffrage was also reflected in children's stories. Literature aimed at children during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the social pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. Boys' stories were full of excitement and adventure while girls' stories were much more conservative. J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, published in novel form in 1911, is a great example of this. Peter is mischievous and adventurous, while Wendy is expected to assume the role of a mother-figure, taking care of Peter, her brothers and the Lost Boys. However, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (published 1865) had begun to challenge these entrenched gender stereotypes. Female characters like Alice were no longer expected to be submissive and quiet, but had been afforded typically male traits such as curious minds and a penchant for adventure. However change is not linear, nor does it happen universally, and the children's book *Votes for Catharine Susan and Me* (Ainslie, 1910) clearly demonstrated the backlash against the Votes for Women campaign amongst certain sections of society. Ainslie's satirical tale of the suffragette movement sees the narrator and her Dutch peg-doll, Catharine Susan, get arrested after causing mayhem, before deciding that they would much rather 'go home quietly' like good girls.

A chronological analysis of advances in equality, such as that seen in *Are We There Yet?* allowed us to chart more clearly the various stages of social reform. It gave both curators and visitors of the exhibition the space to appreciate the changing roles of women throughout the decades and witness how the developing attitudes resulted in girls' role models evolving from submissive peg dolls to noble Black female soldiers. In contrast to Ainslie's book, Hélène Terré's 1942 children's book, *Coucou la Goutte Plays Her Part in the War* offered a strong example of an empowering female role model. Coucou, the French-Senegalese protagonist, joins the war effort to fight for her beloved France; her experiences of racism within the tale reflect the emerging racial tensions within the UK, which would continue to grow over the following decades.

Furthermore, through the use of weekly magazines, newspaper cuttings and journals, the team was able to demonstrate how women were portrayed in the media more generally; how the focus shifted from women's suffrage in the early 20th Century, to women in traditionally masculine worker roles throughout the Second World War. The exhibition was also able to document the struggles women faced post-war when they were expected to return to their domestic lives, facing criticisms if they chose to eschew the traditional gender roles of motherhood and housewifery. Articles from weekly magazines clearly illustrated that, although women had achieved the rights to vote and work in male-dominated professions, new criticisms had begun to emerge regarding their capacity to function on an equal footing with men. *Picture Post* questioned the effect of working mothers on their young children, reflecting the contemporary attitudes that a woman's place was in the home ('The Children of Women who Work', Jan. 7, 1956); while the mental health problems of women were dismissed as 'neuroticism' and 'hysteria' in the 1955 article 'New Life for Neurotics' (*Picture Post*, Nov. 12, 1955). The articles served to illustrate the simultaneous and intersecting equalities issues which were emerging during the various eras: women were no longer simply campaigning for gender equality, but had to contend with multiple oppressions relating to their physical and mental health; their maternity status; their sexual orientation; their ethnicity and nationality.

Engaging with Modern Feminist Activism

The multiple oppressions, which had begun to emerge during the post-war years of the exhibition, were dealt with extensively in the intersectional approaches of modern feminist groups. This so-called second wave of feminism was a relatively rich area for the group to curate as two members of the core project team had been activists within the movement over a number of years. The team was therefore able to use a selection of badges, banners and zines that the women in the group had lent from their personal collections. Manchester Metropolitan University library also houses a collection of copies of *Spare Rib* magazine, which proved invaluable when illustrating debates and issues from the 1970s and 1980s. These included issues relating to abortion, lesbian mothers, equal pay and racism faced by

Black and Asian women,[3] and helped to show that British feminism has been concerned with issues of intersectionality for a number of decades. It is interesting to reflect on these issues today and to realise that many of these topics are still relevant: abortion is still a difficult issue, which poses legal problems for women around the world (for a full discussion on global abortion rights, see Erdman, 2016). Lesbians in England are in a stronger position as mothers, but this is not universally true (for a discussion of lesbian parenting in the United States, for example, see DiGregorio, 2016). Equal pay has been a legal requirement in England since the law was changed in 1970 after a strike by women sewing-machinists at the Ford car plant in Dagenham attracted a good deal of public sympathy (see Cohen, 2012). Despite the changes in law, we were able to demonstrate the latent inequalities which remain for women in the workplace: just days before the exhibition was due to open to the public, *The Guardian* published an article exposing the extent to which women with children are discriminated against in the workplace ('Discrimination of Mothers at Work Soars', *The Guardian*, 24.07.2015). A copy of this article was placed alongside activist publications to highlight the fact that, in the UK, we are yet to reach a state of true gender equality.

These issues and a range of others were also picked up by local publications during the 1980s and 1990s, including the *Manchester Women's Liberation Newsletter* (*MWLN*) and *Eve's Back*, both of which were produced by women's collectives, with little or no funding, and reproduced using photocopiers. (Some surviving copies of the *Manchester Women's Liberation Newsletter* are held at the Feminist Archive North, Leeds). The zines were sold in person, at women's discos and other events, and via local bookshops. Within the exhibition, a local directory from a copy of the *MWLN* from 1986 was shown, which clearly illustrated the extent of feminist activism throughout Lancashire and Greater Manchester at that time. Indeed, over 60 women's groups were listed, including collectives working to eliminate violence against women and girls (Rape Crisis, Taboo, Women's Aid), specific lesbian groups (Lesbian Link, Lesbian Students' Group, Lesbians in Education), Black women's groups (Abasindi, Black Sisters, University Black Women's Group), and political pressure groups (Women Against Racism, Wages for Housework, Women's Fightback). The breadth of these

[3] *Spare Rib* articles: abortion rights demo [1975]; looking back on the Abortion Act 1967 [1979]; equal pay [1976]; lesbian mothers in court [1976]; Asian women speak out against racism [1976]. All issues of *Spare Rib* are now online via the British Library: https://journalarchives.jisc.ac.uk/britishlibrary/sparerib, accessed 2.2.17.

groups, in terms of both geographical reach and the wide-ranging, intersectional subject matter they covered, is astounding.

Also displayed within the exhibition was the cover of *Eve's Back* from May/June 1996, which included an advert inviting women to join the *Eve's Back* collective which 'meets every Wednesday' by writing to a box number at Grassroots Books (a radical bookshop, now sadly defunct). The zine also reported that a new 'Lesbian Avengers' group had been founded in Manchester that March. They were a 'non-violent direct action group committed to raising lesbian visibility and fighting for our survival and our rights'. (Lesbian Avengers, accessed 02.02.2017).

A Spring 1998 edition of *Eve's Back* included the headline 'Single Mothers: overworked, under stress and under attack'. The article, written by an anonymous lone parent, argued that the recently elected New Labour government was failing single parents, who often worked long hours yet struggled to maintain a decent standard of living. The issue of poverty, the author claimed, disproportionately affected oppressed groups such as women and disabled people (the same edition of *Eve's Back* included the headline 'Disability: Labour saves money at whose expense?'), all of which remains pertinent in today's economic climate. (For a discussion of the experiences of lone mothers in UK and Germany, see Klett-Davies, 2007. The study discusses the experiences of 70 lone mothers, all of whom were living in inner-cities and relying on some form of state benefit; the work highlights the social stigma of lone motherhood and the specific socio-economic inequalities faced by this group of women).

Economic decisions adversely and disproportionately affecting women were a recurring theme within the exhibition, albeit unintentionally. An exploration of the burgeoning Rape Crisis movement led the exhibition team to reflect on personal experiences of campaigning against cuts to women's services during the 1990s. Manchester Rape Crisis, which had previously been partially funded by Manchester City Council, faced closure when it was announced that funding for the service would be stopped. Activists campaigned against these cuts in a variety of ways, including holding a demonstration and candlelit vigil on the steps of the Town Hall (on a particularly inhospitable Manchester night) and organising a

letter-writing campaign. As a direct result of this activism, the funding from Manchester City Council continued for a number of years. Using a photograph of the candlelit vigil, (taken by local photographer Julie Fletcher), alongside personal accounts of the struggle, proved a very effective method of illustrating the impact of this activist intervention: it allowed visitors to consider the societal effects of feminist pressure groups and feel empowered to make positive change.

Also active during the 1990s was Justice for Women, a campaign group which advocated on behalf of women who had killed or seriously assaulted violent male partners (Justice for Women, accessed 02.02.2017). Justice for Women groups existed in various locations across England, each as a response to individual cases where women had fought back against violent men (Bindel, Cook & Kelly, 1995). The Manchester group of Justice for Women initially formed to support a woman who had killed a man for sexually abusing her young daughter. The death was eventually found to be an accident and so the woman was acquitted, and the group continued to campaign for local women. As part of this work, women in the group produced a large banner, including the names of some of the many women with whom Justice for Women had worked. The names were written to imitate graffiti on a prison wall, and the banner had been taken along to numerous activist marches prior to entering the exhibition.

Moving into the new millennium, the Campaign to End Rape was involved in lobbying and consultation around the reforms of the law in the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The sister organisation, the Truth About Rape campaign was created to undertake public education work about the realities of rape, and produced a number of postcards highlighting myths about rape, alongside the evidence from research. These were designed with help from the cartoonist Jacky Fleming and her art students. Fleming also made a Truth About Rape banner, which was exhibited alongside the Justice for Women banner. These banners formed one of the most striking parts of the exhibition; their imposing size (The Justice for Women banner was made using a double-sheet as the fabric background) and evocative subject matter prompted debates from visitors, especially since some visitors had been involved with the original campaigns.

Local activism formed an important part of the sections of the exhibition covering the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s; however, the exhibition also demonstrated the extent to which change was happening on a national and international scale during these periods.

Children's literature no longer lagged behind social change, but had instead begun to prompt change. The backlash against Susanne Bösche's *Jenny lives with Eric and Martin* (1983) is a striking example. This story, of a young girl's life with her father and his male partner caused controversy in the UK; debates in Parliament eventually led to Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which prohibited the promotion of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship in schools. Within the exhibition, other works such as Juno Dawson's self-help guide to sexuality and gender, *This Book is Gay* (2014) and Marcus Ewart's picture book *10,000 Dresses* (2009), featuring a transgender protagonist, were used to demonstrate recent progress towards LGBT equality. Indeed the title of the exhibition, *Are We There Yet?* was borrowed from Verna Wilkins' 1995 book of the same name, one of the first to feature disabled characters in positive roles. Malorie Blackman's *Noughts and Crosses* (2006) and Helen Oxenbury's and Trish Cooke's *So Much* (1994) demonstrated the improved racial and ethnic diversity in children's literature. However challenging entrenched gender roles has proved more difficult, and the final section of the exhibition included more traditional books. The pink cover of *The Gorgeous Girls' Colouring Book* (Buster Books, 2011), with its outline images of handbags, butterflies and teacups, sat in stark contrast to its male counterpart, *The Brilliant Boys' Colouring Book* (Buster Books, 2011), whose illustrations included robots, Viking helmets, shooting stars and spaceships. Usborne's *Illustrated Stories for Girls* and *Illustrated Stories for Boys* (2006), cemented the ingrained gender stereotypes seen in the 19th century anthologies for children. While the Usborne boys' book is made up of adventure stories of monsters, pirates, robots and knights, the girls' book comprises tales of mermaids, dolls, princesses and fairies. These items, situated towards the end of the exhibition and surrounded by otherwise strong examples of social advances, prompted a good deal of debate amongst visitors regarding the true extent of progress made in the area of gender equality when girls and boys are given such different role models and aspirations in literature.

Reactions to the Exhibition

The exhibition was open for a period of 71 days, during which time it had 998 visitors. Comments cards were available for all visitors to record their feedback on the exhibition, however only 27 completed cards were returned. Of those visitors who returned feedback forms, 78% were visiting *MMU Special Collections* for the first time, and 93% gave the exhibition a rating of either 'Very good' or 'Good'. Over half (52%) of those completing comments cards were members of the public.

The comments made on all feedback cards illustrated the impact of the exhibition, and highlighted the need for further activism to promote equality and inclusion:

> *I think young people should be encouraged to view the exhibition as it is shocking how different things were relatively recently and shows why it is so important to continue to promote equality.*

> *Reflecting on the struggle to be allowed to be oneself makes you want to weep. The exhibition is thought provoking and hopefully will win hearts and minds. At the end of the day it is all about LOVE.*

However, other visitors used the comments cards to suggest ways in which the exhibition could have been more inclusive and representative:

> *Very good – could also include faith discrimination e.g. anti-Semitism and Islamophobia perhaps?*

> *Great exhibition. Would've liked to see examples of how we're still not there yet.*

In a separate initiative, Manchester Metropolitan University's library staff were encouraged to visit the exhibition as a method of updating their own awareness of equality issues. The staff were asked to rate their knowledge both before and after viewing the exhibition. A

total of 58 (of 115) staff completed feedback forms, and the average knowledge increase was between 20-40% (Kendall, 2015).

There were also other, less formal, pieces of feedback received. Various subject tutors arranged group visits to the exhibition, and reported that students made later comments about their changed understandings of issues surrounding (in)equalities. The exhibition space was also used to host a screening of the 1961 film *Victim*, the first English language film to include the word 'homosexual'. The screening was preceded by a discussion of the themes included in the film, and was attended by students, staff and members of the public. Seeing the exhibition and this early film about homophobia was also enlightening to many of the younger attendees.

In her 2016 article, Changfoot argues that using personal and community experiences in feminist spaces gives a new sense of agency and empowerment to viewers (Changfoot, 2016, p. 64). In order to capture this sense of empowerment, *Are We There Yet?* included a graffiti wall, where visitors were encouraged to leave comments about their impressions of the exhibition and whether they felt that British society had reached a state of equality. This wall allowed visitors to reflect upon their shared experiences and memories of incidents covered by the exhibition and to reminisce about some of the more problematic children's books on display, but also provided a space for further debate regarding global equality issues, ableism (particularly with regard to mental health), and gender identity issues.

The graffiti wall also facilitated conversation between visitors, and allowed people to engage with and develop ideas. One visitor used the comments wall to confide their own anxieties about people finding out about their transgender status and sexual orientation, while others engaged in dialogue regarding global inequalities for women. One person expressed frustration that 'Women still can't vote in Saudi Arabia!', which triggered several other visitors to respond:

> *HORRENDOUS. UNBELIEVABLE.*

Or drive cars!

And they are on the UN Human Rights Council!

Promised the vote by 2015…

This undertaking clearly produced a worthwhile exhibition, which the many visitors appear to have found insightful.

Drawing to a Close: We Are Not There Yet.

The process of curating an exhibition proved challenging for the project team, and important lessons were learned for future endeavours: an established team membership, clear aims and objectives, and a defined terms of reference would have inevitably facilitated a more streamlined approach to curation. However, what the group achieved, as a team of non-specialists, is extraordinary: a sensitively nuanced exhibition about the power of protest and activism; an exhibition which reflected and explored several lived experiences, which did not itself turn into a political protest.

The aim of *Are We There Yet* was to critically examine social progress and the issues surrounding equalities laws and their wider influence on UK society. However, the exhibition did not attempt to present any of the forms of inequality as resolved, on a local, national or international scale. Indeed, as the visitor feedback and this chapter have shown, we are certainly not 'there yet': the gender pay gap in 2016 stood at 9.4% (Equal Pay Portal, accessed 16.02.2017), and discrimination against mothers in the workplace is still widespread. Children's books, toys and clothes are still gendered according to embedded stereotypes (Messner, 2000); while the recent political changes in the UK and the US have resulted in a sharp increase in the number of hate crimes against minority groups (Garcia, 2016; Corcoran and Smith, 2016).

Rather than provide a summary of how the UK became a more equal society over the 150-year period, spanning 1865-2015, the exhibition opened up meaningful debates regarding

the extent to which some people remain oppressed. It also gave visitors the space – both physically and mentally – to reflect on their own role as activists in past and future struggles for equality. While relatively small numbers of visitors completed feedback cards, the volume of comments made on the graffiti wall was testament to the impact the exhibition had on those who visited and engaged with its subject matter.

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